

An Easter sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

I was 16 years old when I saw the play "Our Town". A local playhouse staged it outside under the glimmering stars of Onekama, Michigan, across the lake from our church camp. Little Onekama could have doubled for Thornton Wilder's fictitious Grover's Corners, NH, where the eternal is glimpsed through everyday treadworn familiarity—like an old, favorite sweatshirt. Before milkshakes at the intermission, the narrator introduced the closing act.

"I don't care what they say with their mouths—everybody knows that something is eternal. It ain't houses, and it ain't names, and it ain't earth and it ain't even stars...Everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years. And yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. Yep. There is something way down deep that is eternal about every single human being."

The play shows how easy it is to skim across life's surface and how hard it is to seize and hold the things at the heart of living that every generation shares and that endure forever. The narrator prefaced his monologue, saying, "There are some things we all know, but we don't take 'em out and look at 'em very often." We don't often take them out and look at them, because eternal things often emerge in that immeasurably small gap between life and death. And that isn't an easy place for us to visit, much less an easy place for us to stay.

That is precisely the space the ladies enter as they visit Jesus' tomb to anoint his body one last time, saying final goodbyes. Mary, mother of James, Mary Magdalene, and Salome fearfully approach this liminal gap between night and day, approaching Jesus' tomb. Their horror and bereavement is still fresh at the events that unfolded on Good Friday. Then they find the stone rolled away and the helpful young man. Jesus is gone, he says.

There's no shriek of victory, no gasp of vindication, no leap for joy, no triumphant ecstasy. Only stunned silence, trembling glances and fearful flight. How hard was that for them? With their hearts beating in their throats it reminds us not to take Easter news for granted. Their honest response gives us permission to surface our own doubts, fears, and hopes. It is news so stunning that even these first humans to hear it--women who heard it on the spot where it happened--can barely begin to find any words adequate to tell all the others. No one witnessed Jesus reviving to life. God intervening on Jesus' behalf is invisible; only the results are seen. This holy, mysterious miracle on Easter morning surprises *everyone*.

"So the (women) went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Both visiting Jesus' tomb and departing it, the women have more questions than answers. We come here looking for answers. All we get are more questions. But maybe they are much better questions. And maybe this is how it also was with Jesus during his life. A friend published a book exploring the 307 questions Jesus asked in the gospels and the 3 questions he answered.

We have plenty of questions. Who is the young man dressed in white in the tomb? Why does Jesus precede them to meet in the backwaters of Galilee, of all places? Why is he not there to greet them himself? And would Jesus appear to the chief priests, to Pilate? All we have at Easter is an empty tomb, and the predictable spread of rumors afterward. That is as close as we get to anything like data or proof, objective evidence or “the facts”.

Why is this so? God clearly wants to invite our faith, not certitude grounded in factuality. God invites a personal trust that death and evil can't defeat life's goodness. By faith God invisibly vindicates Christ's love over human hatred, cruelty, and bigotry. These eternal things--the things we're always losing hold of--are revealed at the cusp of life and death.

All of this is at stake as we gather to worship God on Easter Sunday, hoping that a few slivers of eternity might slip through. And that we might claim, preserve and cherish them. Often life must be interrupted by something big—gaining a child, losing a friend, changing a career—before we can dip down and take a hold of what remains eternal within this life.

By now, I've done hundreds of memorial services, but the second I did still sticks with me. It was for 93 year old by the name of Leila Baird. She had outlived all of her peers and friends. Only a handful attended her service in central Illinois. An old farmer with a crew-cut cast agitated looks at me as I wove together lots of scripture with memories of his aunt. His look unnerved me. Had I gotten an important detail wrong, as in his her name?

The nephew drew near afterward. His name was Warren Drake. He challenged the texts I'd read, so full of promise. “The Bible doesn't say that,” he defied me. “How much did invent?” Suddenly, I felt much better. I mean, could handle this. I'd just spent three years reading the Bible in Hebrew and Greek. You could preach for years, and never get such a juicy opening as this. “Let's open the Bible and find each one.” He was still unmoved.

No mistake, I said, flipping through a Bible, locating them one at a time. “...and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever...and he said to the criminal at his left, today you will be in paradise...nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus...in my Father's house there are many rooms, and I go to prepare a place for you.” He could hardly believe it. It's hard it is to keep track of what's eternal within this lifetime.

Swiss theologian Karl Barth said that as we preachers step into a pulpit from one Sunday to the next, the same question is written on every face, every place, and every generation. Barth means the question, “Is it true?” I see that question written on your faces even more today, Easter Sunday. Not just: is it true Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? But also: is it true the Cross means God is never so fully present to us as in our grimmest failures and weakness? Is it true no hatred, violence, or evil is equal to God's care and compassion, and goodness? Is it true that the love we glimpse in Jesus is eternal, even deathproof?

I can only say for me, Jesus is the center of history--personal, global, and cosmic. And of all of his promises, the promises he made that speak to me first and finally are around his death and resurrection. Hear the good news: not only has God not given up on the world

that brutally crucified his Son. The risen Christ is alive, at work and present in our relations.

The risen Christ awaits us out there in the wondrous adventure of life, the risks of loving, the loneliness of truth-telling, the vulnerability of suffering, the exploitation of our kindness, and the glorious hope of rising above all that would drag us down in this world or the next.

It is as hard to articulate today as it was then. But as we *live* Jesus' story by not returning evil for evil, by not replacing truth with lies, by forgiving attackers, by seeing others as God's beloved children and living with beloved in Christ as the final say of who we are, we can carry his truth all of our days. We can carry it with us always and share it with others.

If we can't say it, and if the world can't hear it, then let us go and *show* the world with our life's defining acts and deeds. Alleluia. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.